Chapter 11

Gender Dimensions of Aging Among Indigenous People: A Case Study on Khasi Indigenous Group in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Researchers view older people as a homogenous group where age is a leveler of characteristics. But factors such as gender, socio-economic background, family relationships and support, living situation, physical condition, cultural practices, etc. severely influence how a person will enjoy their later life. In Khasi Indigenous community women enjoy higher status than their counterparts. Due to a strong matriarchical family system, women become the owner of property inherently and husbands stay in wives’ houses. This empowers women economically and family members show their loyalty to the head of the family who is a woman. During old age, women are well cared for by family members, and elderly males are sometimes neglected, which is totally opposite to the majority people of Bangladesh. Based on an ethnographic study, this chapter explains how customs work in the creation of a special later life experience among elderly women. It also explains the challenges faced by Khasi elderly people in getting access to modern medical facilities and other government supports as citizen of Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Old age is a critical phase of life. There is a tendency among researchers to view all older peoples as a homogenous group and for which age is a leveler of all other characteristics. However, along with age, other factors including sex, socio-economic background, family relationship and support, living situation, physical condition, cultural practices etc. can influence how a person will enjoy his/her later life (Gelfand 1982). This is particularly true if the older person is a member of a visible minority group, and particularly so in the case of non-conventional minorities like tribal and indigenous peoples whose cultures tend to be treated as quaint and ancient. (Manuel 1982). Moody (1998) provides a ranking of

the least advantaged elderly groups according to their vulnerability in which he puts tribal elderly on the top of the list. He documented the problems of tribal elderly as of an ‘exclusive nature’ in that they are usually excluded from all development/welfare programmes initiated by the governments. This reality is now accepted by researchers and policy makers in developed countries and has brought to light the importance of ageing issues in ethnic minorities. Bangladesh is a country with a rich cultural heritage and a land of variety. It is not only the Bengalis (mainstream people) who have contributed to this culture, but also the tribal communities of the country who are distinctly different from the mainstream Bengali population in culture, religion, tradition, customs, ethnic origin etc. More than 45 tribal communities are living in different parts of Bangladesh. Now the total number of tribal people of the country is about 2.5 million. Of the tribal groups, 12 are concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region and 33 groups live in plain lands scattered throughout the country (Mankhin 2003). The Khasi community is plain land indigenous group living in Sylhet and Mymensingh region of Bangladesh from time immemorial.

Khasis are connected with people who inhabited the Molay Peninsula and Chota Nagpur at the time of the stone-age (Gurdon, 1996). It is said that the Khasis the ‘Mons’ who migrated from China and whose origin were in Burma or they were one of the races of “Turanian origin”. A theory describes that the Khasis are the aboriginal inhabitants of the Khasi- Jaintia Hills (Bhattacharjee, 1984). They traveled westward migration through the Patkai route and finally encroached upon the Khasi-Jaintia Hills (Bhattacharjee 1984). Jaintiapur, the capital of Khasi-Jaintia kingdom’s capital was geographically located inside the Sylhet Division of Bangladesh. It is said that the duration of Jaintia Kingdom was from 1500 A.D. to 1835 A.D. and spread over the areas of Jaintiapur, Gowainghat, Kanaighat, part of Companygonj of Sylhet District and Gova and Dimarua regions of Naogon District of Assam in India (Rahman 2004). Now Jaintiapur is the thana headquarters of Sylhet District where a few archaeological sites of their kingdom remain uncared for. Some Khasi people are still living in the District. The largest settlements of the Khasi people live in Kulaura, Borolekha, Juri, Kamalgonj and Sreemangal thanas of Moulvibazar District. Almost all of these Khasi people are concentrated in deep remote hilly forest zones. It is said that there will be about 90 (ninety) Khasi villages throughout the whole area where they are currently living (Rahman, 2004). The total number of the Khasi people is estimated at 20 thousand. Like other tribal people in Bangladesh the Khasis have laws, traditions and customs of their own which are distinct in character (Ahmmed, 2010). However, they have many similarities with the customs of the Garo tribes. The mothers’ kinship is dominant among them. It should be mentioned that although women hold the family property, they have no voice in public affairs outside the home. Any social judicial or political issues are operated by the males. The supreme God based traditional religion of the Khasis, “Ka Naim”, underwent a dramatic change when the Jaintia king suddenly became fond of Hindu religion (Dutta 1982). After the intervention of the British, their religion came under threat again. Even though some modern Khasis persist in claiming themselves as Hindus, their religious, cultures and norms are not a hundred percent similar with the mainstream Hindus of Bangladesh (Ahmmed, 2010). Now most Khasis are Catholic and a smaller number of them are Protestants.

Khasi Indigenous community in Bangladesh has a unique pattern of living in which women enjoy higher status than their counterparts. Due to having strong practice of Matriarchal family system, women become the owner of property inherently and husband stay wives’ house. This system empowers women economically and family members show their loyalty to the head of the family who is a woman. During old age women are well-cared by family members and elderly males are sometimes neglected which is totally opposite to the majority people of Bangladesh. The community still led a simple life with minimum external opportunities. Due to not having smooth connectivity with mainstream culture
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